Title: Listening to women: Relational approaches to female offender management

Running head: Listening to women

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Abstract

Purpose: To explore women's experiences of criminal justice systems to inform the development of guidance on working with women.

Design/methodology/approach: A two-part, independent samples, qualitative study utilising semi-structured interviews incorporating both IPA and Thematic Analysis was conducted. In study 1, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six women on probation in the community and data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. Interviews in study 2 were conducted with seven women in custody with data analysed using inductive-deductive thematic analysis. The applicability and expansion of study 1 themes was then explored.

Findings: Seven emergent themes indicated relational approaches to offender management may improve experiences of judicial systems for female offenders and for their probation officers. This approach may help prevent common systemic issues from perpetuating negative interactions between these groups. Specific suggestions for developing relational security and consistency of care within these relationships are provided.

Practical implications: Taking a relational approach to female offender management may help remedy some of the systemic difficulties faced by female offenders and their probation officers.

Originality: By focussing on the experiences of women screened in to the Offender Personality Disorder Pathway this study provides insight as to how this service can assist in the development of relational security between probation staff and their clients.

Women comprise around 5% of the UK prison population (around 4000 individuals), a figure that has remained relatively consistent for the last 10 years (Ministry of Justice; MOJ, 2018a). Almost 60% of women are serving sentences of less than 4 years with 18% serving less than 12 months (MoJ, 2018a). The majority (74%) of imprisoned women have previous convictions and 48% are reconvicted within a year of release (Hewson & Roberts, 2017). Such is the significance of this problem that two key aims of the MoJ Female Offender Strategy is to reduce the female prison population and to foster a move away from issuing short custodial sentences (MoJ, 2018b). However, a substantial reduction in investment in women-specific services has been noted, with fewer than 25% of probation officers having received training in female-specific case management and a dearth of women-only reporting centres (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Probation (HMIP), 2016).

Amongst female prisoners it has been estimated that between 77% and 98% have a history of traumatic experiences including childhood abuse, sexual assault and intimate partner violence (Lynch *et al.,* 2012). Women in prison report higher levels of drug and alcohol misuse and are much more likely to self-harm than men (MoJ, 2018). The prevalence of mental health problems amongst women were also highlighted by The Corston Report, which raised concerns about a lack of consistent mental health and psychological support across the Criminal Justice System (Corston, 2007). Left unacknowledged, traumatic experiences can lead to persistent and complex mental health conditions (van Nierop et al., 2015; Ashton *et al.,* 2016), poor attachment formation and difficulties developing positive interpersonal relating styles (Cloitre *et al.,* 2005; McKechnie, 2015), and behavioural effects such as violence and aggression (Widom & Wilson, 2015). It has been argued that a "continuum of care" and a custody-to-community connection needs to be developed well in advance of release from prison (Covington, 2007, p.(11)). However, an inspection report found that a third of women had received insufficient work to manage and minimise identified vulnerabilities (HMIP, 2016). The importance of continuity, the quality of relationships and trust between Offender Managers (OM) and those they supervise have also been cited as core components of both effective

practice and desistance (Ugwudike and Raynor, 2013). Establishing a mutually trusting and confident relationship has been evidenced as more important than any one given approach in bringing about change in attitudes and behaviour (Council of Europe, 2017). Guidance on effective custodial management specifies the importance of prison officers engaging with prisoners in order to motivate and empower them to challenge criminal attitudes and offer hope (National Offender Management Service (NOMS), 2015b). Further, supportive relationship styles have been reported to impact positively on women's ability to reduce anxiety, with more punitive styles found to compound a sense of injustice and negatively affect anxiety management (Morash *et al.,* 2014). Women subject to 'life licences' (i.e., supervision in custody or on probation for the whole of their lives) indicated staff factors such as reliability, encouragement, support and a non-judgemental style as important (Appleton, 2010).

The Women's Offender Personality Disorder Pathway (W-OPDP) is a national initiative across England and Wales designed to address some of the problems faced by women presenting with probable personality disorder characteristics (NOMS, 2015a). While Diversion schemes (Women's Pathfinder, 2020) and early intervention approaches are essential processes to help reduce the number of new women entering the Criminal Justice System, those screening in to the Women's OPD Pathway can present with more complex needs requiring a greater level of intervention. Part of the core work of this pathway is to offer support and guidance (through consultations) to offender managers (OMs; probation staff) struggling with particularly complex and challenging individuals. Within the Wales W-OPDP in Wales, a transitional support service has been developed to promote consistent care in order to improve the transition from custody to resettlement in the community (O'Meara *et al.,* 2019).

While there have been numerous studies addressing pathways into crime amongst women (e.g., Simpson *et al.,* 2008), and factors linked to desistance (e.g., Rodermond *et al.,* 2016; Stone *et al.,* 2018), this study sought to establish important features of OM-offender interactions from the perspective of the women subject to probation or in custody. While interventions available for

female offenders have historically been adapted from male interventions, this study sought insight into the female experience. Specifically, the aim was to understand women's relationships with Offender Managers (OM) and barriers to engagement with the probation service in order to assist OPDP staff in generating recommendations for building better working relationships. This study formed part of a wider project of the needs of women subject to custody or probation.

METHOD

Ethical Considerations

This research was registered with the HMPPS National Research Committee (2014-160/288) and granted ethical approval by the Wales Research Ethics Committee 3 (WA.14.0151) as part of a larger study on women's needs. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and the right to withdraw without penalty was reinforced. One interview was terminated early due to distress displayed by the participant, with support provided by the OM in response to the issues disclosed.

Design

A two-study sequential design was used to collect data from a community setting (study 1) and within a prison unit (study 2). Semi-structured interviews (available from the authors) were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed manually (Study 1) or using NVivo software (Study 2). Study 1 sought to gain insights into individual experiences and adopted Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as an exploratory approach (Smith *et al.,* 2009). Utilising an IPA approach allowed for experiential components of participants' responses to be explored while also allowing the Study 1 researcher (a senior probation officer) to acknowledge the impact their own experience may have on their interpretation of the data. Study 2 utilised a thematic analysis approach to examine the wider applicability of Study 1 themes to interactions with CJS staff in an alternative setting and to enable additional themes to be identified.

Procedure

Study 1 – Participants were recruited from two urban probation sites with similar demographics (300-350,000 populations; coastal locations; comparable cost of living). OMs identified potential participants meeting the inclusion criteria from their caseload and six of the seven identified agreed to take part. Interviews took place within probation premises and ranged from 17 to 106 minutes in duration.

Study 2 – Participants meeting the inclusion criteria were recruited from a UK prison and were identified by prison staff and OPDP Wales' transitional support nurse. Out of nine women approached, seven agreed to take part. Interviews were conducted in a treatment unit of the prison and ranged in length from 10-51 minutes.

Participants

To be eligible for the study, women needed to meet OPDP criteria (either presenting with 7+ out of 10 anti-social personality disorder characteristics or meeting two or more other criteria (self-harm, challenging behaviour, childhood difficulties and mental health problems; Minoudis *et al.,* 2012)); be currently subject to community supervision (study 1) or in custody (study 2); able to give informed consent; and fluent in spoken English. Women were recruited through contact with their probation officer (Study 1) or through the Wales Transitional Support service (O'Meara, *et al.,* 2020). Demographic and offender characteristics for all participants are detailed in Table 1.

Study 1 - Participants were subject to community sentences or statutory licence periods (i.e., compulsory probation supervision) ranging from 12 months to life sentences. All described their ethnicity as White British which reflects 92% of the overall population of women on probation in Wales. Mean age was 41 years (sd = 10.34) and the number of criminal convictions held ranged from 1 to 22.

Study 2 - Participants were currently serving sentences for violent or sexual offences. All were from South Wales and six identified their ethnicity as White-British, one as Asian-British. Mean age was 35 years (sd = 5.1) and the number of criminal convictions held ranged from 1 to 53.

INSERT TABLE 1

ABOUT HERE

Analysis

Prior to analysis, all identifying factors, such as names and locations, were removed to maintain confidentiality.

Study 1 – An IPA approach was adopted following the steps outlined by Smith *et al.,* (2009). Each transcript was read several times and audio recordings were listened to while reading transcripts. Each transcript was analysed in turn to identify ideas and themes. Review and revision of emerging ideas and cross-referencing of transcripts led to final themes being generated, labelled, clustered and exemplar quotes identified.

Study 2 – A combined deductive-inductive thematic analysis was utilised. Themes identified from study 1 were used as a framework to guide analysis of study 2 data, while also allowing new themes to emerge from the women in custody data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

FINDINGS

A total of seven themes were identified; five were evidenced in study 1 and 2 and two were derived from study 2 only (indicated by *). The integration of sub-themes from each study is presented in Table 2 where it can be seen that one sub-theme from study 1 was split and combined with a related sub-theme from study 2 to form two distinct constructs.

INSERT TABLE 2

ABOUT HERE

To make sense of these sub-themes in the context of probation service provision and OPD involvement, these sub-themes were grouped into three superordinate themes representing systemic issues (three themes); women's responses (two themes) and a proposed relational solution to these patterns (two themes), as presented in Figure 1. Representative quotes are labelled by study and participant number such that S1.1 relates to study 1, participant 1.

INSERT FIGURE 1

ABOUT HERE

Systemic Issues

Participants described feeling lost in the system through a sense of abandonment, frustration over not understanding processes, being denied access to services, and perceiving themselves to be of little importance to their OMs. Women reported not knowing their OM, not having effective contact with OMs and being unclear about the level of interaction women should have with OMs. Systemic issues emerging from excessive caseloads and changing workplace priorities, exacerbated anxieties felt by those struggling with mental health difficulties and, for those in custody, compounded concerns about post release supervision and resource (e.g., housing). This theme contained three subthemes.

Forgotten about

Being forgotten about presented literally and indirectly. For those new to probation, not knowing how probation processes worked and not receiving an adequate induction to these processes left women feeling anxious and afraid: *"I was just scared and didn't have a clue." S1.5; "Oh shit, I was petrified." S1.6*. Such individual needs being 'forgotten about' or overlooked were also evident in the resignation or acceptance about the lack of contact with OMs amongst some serving longer prison sentences.

"I've been in jail for the last three years, so I don't have contact with probation now. I've only ever spoken to them twice since I've been in, and it's changed about three times." S2.2

The impact of a lack of contact with OMs whilst in prison was highlighted through the practical implications of this. The importance of pre-emptively supporting individuals to adjust to community living after prison was one area noted.

"When you've done a long time in prison you are used to being around people twenty-four seven and then you're free then and it's the time that you've got on your hands and the loneliness... They should put things in place before you get out of that gate. Like they promises you the world and does nothing." S1.2

For many of those in prison being forgotten about showed itself through procedures such as the paperwork for ROTL applications (Release On Temporary Licence i.e., community leave from prison to promote custody-community transition typically lasting 1-5 days), housing checks, and communicating with prison authorities.

"It was only towards the end of my sentence when you realise that they are so influential on your release… people don't know you and you want them to make a judgement on you and not other people's reports and stuff like that." S1.1

"I was due for ROTLs [six months ago]. I haven't been on one ROTL yet... outside probation still haven't sent the paperwork in to release me for the day… and I've got to rely on these when I leave. There is no trust already." S2.4

Conditional care

A sense of conditionality to the care received manifested itself differently across the two study groups. For those in the community, denial of access to mental health services, for example due to alcohol misuse, was a particular focus.

"I badly need to see the mental health team because I'm a self-harmer. I have committed suicide (sic) several times. They won't see me until I've given up the alcohol and controlled it." S1.3

In the custodial group, conditional care presented through women being told their problems were not bad enough to justify support or a referral to specialist services.

"I was classed as a low risk offender so basically they didn't take much time with me because I wasn't really a problem, if you know what I mean." S2.5

In addition, some reported a 'requirement' to have already addressed their difficulties before being offered help.

"I think going to rehab would've helped but I didn't get referred there… They said you have to give up drinking for a certain amount of time before you go to rehab." S2.2

*"Palmed off"

Women often experienced referral to other services or existing alternative support as an opportunity for OMs to reduce or cease providing active input. Although participants

continued to attend probation (as might be a statutory requirement) the sense was that probation would defer responsibility to the other organisation(s).

"I'm meant to be on probation but if they hear you're in hospital they very rarely come and see you anyway. They just leave the time lapse and I'd have a last meeting." S2.1

"I've obviously told them about my concerns about myself and that but they just tell me to speak to my doctor or my CPN, but you know…. Probation just palmed me off to them." S2.5

Some custodial participants felt that once they were in prison, their OMs would leave prison staff to manage their needs.

Women's responses to systemic issues

Participants described two broad responses when interacting with a service they perceived to be fractious and unreliable: non-engagement and wearing a mask.

Non-engagement

A lack of trust and a sense of dejection meant some women found it difficult to engage with their OMs. Without an established rapport, some women were suspicious of new officers and refused to work with them collaboratively.

"Yes you pull the strings… but speak to me with respect and you get it back. But [when] you're looking at me, thinking I'm just a piece of shit off someone's shoe or a thug, then I'm sorry, I ain't speaking to you with respect.'" S2.3

Frequent changes in OM compounded non-engagement through apathy on both sides based on a likely short-lived relationship.

"With probation changing every couple of weeks I just didn't bother getting to know them… It's horrible… I'd just turn up and they'd say 'oh, you're seeing this person today.'" S2.1

In contrast, women who had regular supportive contact with their OM felt able to engage more fully. This was seen to allow a more helpful approach to probation to be experienced.

"The use of support is much better than just always questioning someone. People clam up and they are not going to talk to you. I wouldn't have worried about going to the probation officer… 'I really messed up here'… I could talk to her and I wouldn't worry that she is going to send me back to jail and take my freedom and ruin my life." S1.1

Wearing a mask

Women described presenting a façade in the absence of a genuine relationship with their OM. However, where trust could be developed individuals believed that this would be recognised by the OM.

"It's easy to just put a front up. I did it long enough… and like I said, if you haven't got that relationship with your officer, they're not gonna notice you're putting that front up." S2.4

This façade was commonly used to deny negative thoughts and to avoid asking for help when it was needed for fear that this would lead to adverse or punitive consequences.

"I thought I had a good relationship with my probation officer, but I went there one day for help, because I suffer from metal health problems and I'd stopped taking my medication. I went there for help and instead of her helping me, she phoned the police and got me arrested from there." S2.5

Some noted specific factors that fostered the wearing of a mask or that could allow the mask to be removed. These included the OM's style and whether the individual had 'anything to hide'.

"I know you've got to be authoritative and have to do certain things but it's how you do them certain things because people are going to lie to you and the problems are going to get so

big to the point that you have to recall them because they can't be honest with you about anything." S1.1

Proposed relational solutions

In order to foster a more helpful alliance and consequently more effective and meaningful probation supervision, two themes were evident in the participants' narratives - consistency of care and forming a bond.

*Consistency of care

Consistent contact with the same officer was identified by many women as one of the most important aids to working well with their OM and aiding transitions from prison to the community. Consistency was seen as potentially preventing recall or acrimonious situations developing.

"I want her to have a good understanding with me already in prison, so she knows when I go outside how to help me, you see?" S2.7

"when I go home on home-leaves and things, I'll have to go to probation to just pop in and see her and I'm hoping that we can build a good relationship on my ROTLs, so when I get out I have a bit more trust in her." S2.5

"I used to just go there like once a week and I used to have a good chat with them about any problems about my gas electric or what I find stressful, you know about money and not being there on time and things like that. It was just good that they were there." S2.6

Forming a bond

Participants identified ways that a bond between them and their OM could be fostered. Some commented on the importance of the environment, highlighting the women-only 'one stop shop' in

one area created a sense of security: *"It feels a lot safer here and it helps you settle down more."* *S1.4.* An important distinction was made between being known about and being known, with personal contact essential for relationships to develop.

> *"I couldn't even tell you to this day who my fucking probation officer is on the out. I've never met 'em, I don't know their name, it could be a man, woman, I don't know. I don't know fuck all. I've seen two different ones in here, like two years ago, and like I said, you're asking me how I am, you haven't got a fucking clue **who** I am so, you might as well just fuck off. Basically… I didn't mean it nasty but... no one knows fuck all these days."* S2.6

Forming a bond and developing trust were seen as contributing to progress; *"I feel comfortable, I got a relationship with her where she can make my decisions and she knows what's best for me and what's not best to me." S2.7,* with mutual respect highlighted as one way in which a bond might be created.

> *"I think she understands me now. I think she knows I'm not a liar or a bullshitter… I think we've got a lot of mutual respect going on like."* S1.2

Intrinsic to forming a bond was respectful communication, understanding the humanity of an individual's situation, and avoiding addressing casework as a paper-and-pencil task.

> *"How they are on a one-to-one needs to be more supportive and restorative rather than what it is… It's our life when we come in here, it's not just paperwork so we feel everything like emotionally in terms of what's said."* S1.1

This was noted in contrast to a focus on monitoring for rule breaking, with participants stating that

> *"They are not interested in anything really except did you break the law. I suppose that's what they are there for." S1.2* and noting

"They set you up to fail, that's what I feel, and I've got a big long sentence to come out to, and I'm just worried that when I go out, you know, where am I going to go for help? Where can I go? You know, because I don't trust probation." S2.5

DISCUSSION

For the women in this study, being honest with their OM and being able to talk about their needs was predicated on developing trusting and open relationships with their OM. The central importance of a functional and supportive relationship with one's OM reported here, is a long-established principle and mirrors previous findings (e.g., Shapland *et al.,* 2012). Good OM-offender interactions are likely to enhance relational security, which itself is fundamental to the successful delivery of women's secure services (Walker *et al.,* 2017), and of offender management more generally (Maguire and Raynor, 2016). However, from the themes identified, it possible to generate specific recommendations to enable criminal justice staff to facilitate meaningful and productive engagement with women on the offender personality disorder pathway.

Functional relationships were reported to be contingent upon safety and consistency, factors also noted in a recent UK government publication seeking to address reoffending in women (NOMS, 2015c). In order to foster a safe environment, some areas have developed a women-only 'one stop shop' (Women's Pathfinder, 2018) with the resources needed to be able to address multiple needs in a single place. Whilst such environmental factors were noted as helpful by the women here, the development of engagement and rapport also requires a range of specific interpersonal factors.

It is widely accepted that individuals with traumatic histories have heightened sensitivity to rejection (Downey *et al.,* 1997; Leary *et al.,* 2006), thus the themes of "Consistency of care" and attending to "Forming a bond" were identified as central to engagement. A lack of 'relational consistency' was reported to be a major cause of anxiety for women, yet they reported many physical and relational transitions throughout their sentence. Continuity in their relationships with staff was reported to provide a sense of security and support. While OMs themselves can be central

to continuity through transitions from custody to the community, other ways to supplement and bridge the potential gaps have been piloted within the OPDP. For example, the Transitional Support Mental Health Liaison service for women in the OPDP (Morgan, 2017; O'Meara *et al.,* 2019) spans this period and provides a non-criminal justice adjunct to the OM involvement. This can act as a conduit for important information for service users and can support OMs to gain a better understanding of individual needs and the impact of trauma on behaviour. Such transition staff also model trauma informed responses to difficulties that inevitably arise (O'Meara, *et al.,* 2020). Several stylistic factors were identified by participants such as the importance of taking a supportive stance in order to encourage open communication and awareness of lasting effect interpersonal interactions can have .

At the organisational level, staff need sufficient time and support to form and, where necessary, appropriately end relationships with women with whom they work. OMs have reported that their workloads were unreasonable, taking into account the profile of their cases and the range of work they were required to undertake… noting they were "playing catch up continually and am extremely stressed and completely burnt out" (HMIP, 2019, p21-22). This inspection report also noted that in spite of strong work ethics, workload volume meant OMs struggled to maintain high standards. Participants highlighted the importance of saying "goodbye" and being directly notified by staff about changes in their management. Small acts such as OMs informing women in custody about developments in their sentence or management can help ensure they don't feel forgotten about. While it is acknowledged that caseload changes can happen unexpectedly, personal communication can limit the negative impact of change and avoid the sense of being ignored and left 'in the dark', thus minimising further feelings of abandonment or rejection.

The underlying motivations and functions of behaviour rather than the specific expression / surface-level description need to be understood if staff are to respond appropriately. As noted by participants, anger may be used as a distancing strategy utilised to avoid relationships and thus

minimise future perceived rejection. Where this is the case, psychological training made available to staff could help guide responses to the underlying "cause" (e.g., anxiety, insecurity) rather than the overt communication. Similarly, individuals may 'wear a mask' in order to maintain a distance and minimise likely future experiences of loss. In order to allow this mask to be removed, staff need to draw on core relational skills such as genuineness, openness, consistency, warmth and interest/curiosity (Rogers, 1979) and this again may be facilitated by appropriate psychological training and guidance provided, for example, by OPD pathway colleagues. OMs providing appropriate connections to other services to facilitate development or to meet needs can be important however, this should not be accompanied by stepping away. For those in this study, OMs maintaining contact throughout an individuals' journey is necessary and could prevent women feeling dismissed and later disengaging.

While strong family connections and named positive role-models are readily identified as protective factors, it is important, at an organisation level, to recognise that OMs and probation services may be a more consistent presence in an offender's life than family or friends. Thus, a system that assures consistency of caseload and thus provides the security required to build the foundation for a supportive relationship, might not only help the OM-client relationship but also enable other positive relationships to be made.

Limitations / further research

The findings here are derived from the experiences of women who meet the OPD pathway criteria. While many of the themes identified are likely to be more widely applicable, there is a need to examine if these experiences fit with women not meeting the pathway criteria and the extent to which the model of relating derived here can be more widely applied.

CONCLUSION

This paper serves to highlight the needs that could be met by facilitating a shift in focus within practice (e.g., to consistency and relational factors) rather than by additional funds per se. It is critical that service leaders and policy makers heed the well-evidenced guidance provided in the Corston report and follow through on key priorities outlined in the MoJ female offender strategy (MoJ, 2018b) in order to respond to core needs which both underlie and exist in parallel to offending behaviour. By being supported to develop good relationships and allow an open and honest dialogue to take place, OMs can support their female caseload through the difficulties they face, encouraging a move away from criminal logic and towards desistance. The recently installed OMiC (Offender Management in Custody) model that has been rolled out across England and Wales may prove a useful step in easing OM-offender relations, although movement within the prison system will still result in changing points of contact for women, potentially destabilising relationships built.

Implications for Practice

- Focussing on consistency and appreciating the complex needs of women in the CJS may help improve OM-offender interactions.
- Relational security in female offender management may be enhanced if systemic issues such as frequent changes in OM for clients and the size of OM caseloads is addressed.
- Supporting OMs to recognise and acknowledge the relational strategies used by women to 'protect themselves' (non-engagement and 'wearing a mask') may help criminal justice staff to help develop psychologically informed working in the face of systemic difficulties.

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Part.	Age	Sentence Type	Length (months)	Most serious offence	Age at first offence	Convictions at time of interview
				Study 1 Community sample		
1	56	Life sentence	999[1]	Arson with Intent	34	4
2	37	Community Rehabilitation	12	Common Assault (DV[2])	37	1
3	51	Determinate Sentence	51	Grievous Bodily Harm	19	22
4	29	Life sentence	999	Attempted Murder	17	1
5	40	Community Rehabilitation	24	Severe neglect of children	38	2
6	34	Suspended Sentence	18	Common Assault (DV)	20	9
				Study 2 Custody sample		
1	35	Adult Custody	28	Cruelty to or neglect of children	34	1
2	42	Extended sentence	144	Shooting, wounding etc.,	19	14
3	38	Standard Determinate custody	39	Robbery and assaults with intent to rob	16	53
4	37	Adult Custody	88	Shooting, wounding etc.,	14	7
5	32	Standard Determinate custody	114	Aggravated burglary in a dwelling	23	9
6	26	Standard Determinate custody	96	Shooting, wounding etc.,	15	11
7	37	Adult Custody	60	Sexual activity with child	36	1

Note: 1 - 999 months is the standard length given to identify life sentences; 2 - DV = Domestic violence

Table 1: Participant characteristics

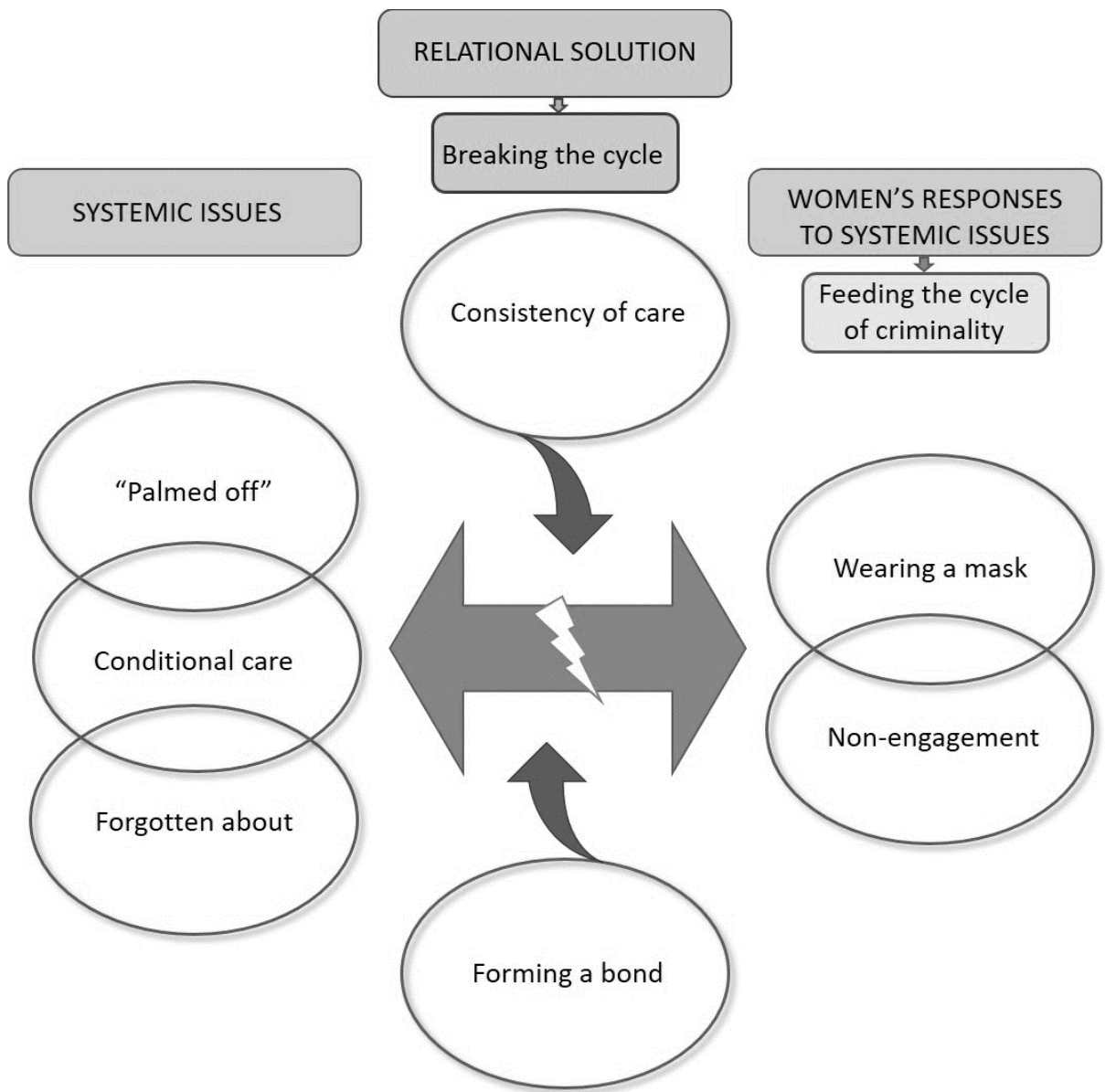| Study 1 themes	Integrated Study 1 and study 2 themes
From the outside looking in	→ Forgotten about
Conditional care and transition support	→ Conditional care
Wearing a mask	→ Wearing a mask
Feeling safe, gaining support	→ Forming a bond
	→ Non-engagement
	*Consistency of care
	*"Palmed off"

Table 2: Sub-themes derived from Studies 1 and 2

Figure 1: Process map of relational themes emerging from interviews